

plans without the guarantee of critical protections. Millions of Americans should not be held hostage to the hope that their State might pass legislation providing these protections. In fact, while States have the authority to pass patient protections for these plans, not one has enacted all of these protections. That is why we need strong Federal legislation to ensure that all health plans provide patients these important rights.

Even for those it does cover, the Chairman's proposal leaves out many of the most fundamental protections. For example, it does not have an adequate enforcement mechanism to ensure that patients are compensated when they are injured or die as a result of a health plan's decisions; it does not assure patients access to specialists, such as oncologists or heart specialists; and it leaves our continuity of care protections. That is why every major patient, doctor, and nurse advocacy organization has concluded that this proposal is simply inadequate.

Today represents the first test of whether this new Congress is serious about providing Americans with a strong, enforceable Patients' Bill of Rights to assure high quality health care. I urge the Committee to do everything it can to pass this test and give Americans the health care protections they need.

Remarks on Presenting the Presidential Medal of Freedom to George J. Mitchell

March 17, 1999

The President. Well, thank you very much. I am very grateful for your warm reception. I take it you had a good time inside. [Laughter] You not only put me out of the White House, you put all of yourselves out, too, because we wanted to be here where we could sit as one, to participate in this very important ceremony.

I thank you, *Taoiseach*, Celia. I thank all the party leaders who are here: Mr. Trimble, Mr. Mallon, John Hume, Gerry Adams, all the others. I thank Mo Mowlam for her tireless work. And the members of the Irish Government who are here, I thank all of them.

Mo Mowlam has got a great sense of humor, so I'm going to tell you a story she told me upstairs, and I'll never live over it, I know. But she said one night she spent the night here with Hillary and me, and she got in rather late. We stayed up rather later speaking. And then she went to sleep, and something happened, and she had to get on the phone early in the morning, London time, which is in the middle of the night our time. And the operator called back and said that she was having trouble finding Secretary Mowlam; she was in Mr. Lincoln's bedroom. [Laughter] She said it was quite obvious the operator did not know who Mr. Lincoln was or that he had been deceased for quite some time. [Laughter] But she at least felt that she was in good company. [Laughter]

I would like to thank the members of our administration who are here and the rather astonishing number of Members of Congress who are here. I'd like to ask all the Members of the United States Congress who are here to please stand, wherever you are. [Applause] Thank you. Many have come with their spouses. Congressman King came with about 15 members of his family—[laughter]—represents about 5 percent of the total brood. [Laughter] We're delighted to see them all.

I'd also like to say a special word of welcome to Senator Mitchell and to Heather and to all of George's family and friends who are here. As all of you know, in addition to the entertainment, which we'll talk about in a moment, our primary purpose here is to give me the opportunity, in front of the Irish-American community and so many of our friends from Ireland, north and south, to present the Presidential Medal of Freedom to Senator George Mitchell. [Applause] Thank you.

I really don't know if this is going to mean anything to George anymore; he's gotten so many honors lately. He can't walk two blocks down any street without someone throwing some sort of trophy at him—[laughter]—Irish-American of the Year, Honorary Degree from Dublin's Trinity College. He even got an honorary knighthood from the Queen of England. George Lucas offered to give him "the Force"—[laughter]—but he said "the Force" was already with him. [Laughter]

Few Americans have served with such distinction in so many different capacities: prosecutor, judge, Senator, Presidential envoy, chair of Northern Ireland's historic peace talks. His, as most of you know, is a great American story. His father, born to Irish immigrants, adopted by Lebanese immigrants; his mother herself born in Lebanon. She worked a night shift at a textile mill; his father cleaned the buildings at Colby College. They stressed education and hard work, and George supplemented his scholarships with jobs as steward, dorm proctor, construction worker, night watchman, truck driver, and insurance adjuster.

Now we all know why he fought so hard for the working people of our country. At one time or another, he did everything that they do all day, every day.

I've heard George say on more than one occasion that his favorite part of being a Federal judge was administering the citizenship oath to new American citizens. He said he was very moved when one of them told him, "I came here because in America, everybody has a chance."

Well, this son of immigrants has done his dead-level best to make sure that in our country everybody does have a chance. And he replaced a remarkable man, Senator Edmund Muskie, in the Senate and in just 8 years became the majority leader.

In our time together, he pushed through crucial laws that enabled us to turn around our horrendous deficit, get our budget in order, and start to grow our economy again, to give tax breaks to working people, to broaden voter registration, to give 20 million people, now, access to the family and medical leave law, to put 100,000 police on the street, protect religious freedom, clean up the environment, stand up for our veterans. That's just a few of the things that he did.

When he announced his retirement, it was a bittersweet moment, for friends and colleagues wished him well but also knew we would miss him dearly in this town. And I devised a scheme, the dimensions of which George would only later appreciate. [Laughter] I think it is the only time in our long relationship where I outsmarted him, instead of the other way around. [Laughter]

I asked him to take a small, part-time commitment as my special economic adviser to Northern Ireland. [Laughter] Then the British and Irish Governments stepped in and asked him to chair talks on disarmament and then on bringing a comprehensive peace after a generation of bloodshed. The small, part-time commitment became more all-consuming than being Senate majority leader. I got even with him for leaving me. [Laughter]

He drew up principles of nonviolence, aimed at preventing further tragedies while the talks proceeded. In building common ground among longtime antagonists he was a patient listener when he needed to be and a decisive leader when he had to be. He earned the respect of all parties for fairness, integrity, and judgment. And he built the trust necessary to move toward an agreement.

Through more than 100 trips across the Atlantic, shall I say that again?—through more than 100 trips across the Atlantic, he continued to press ahead in the cause of peace. Northern Ireland learned what its sister and brothers knew from endless nights of cribbage, what his college basketball teammates saw from their tenacious starting guard, what his fellow legislators learned on the Senate floor and on the tennis court, and what I learned as his friend and colleague: Don't be fooled by the calm demeanor; this guy is a ferocious competitor, determined to succeed.

During the course of this endeavor, George and Heather's son, Andrew, was born. George thought of Andrew, and also of the 61 children born in Northern Ireland on the same day. He wanted to champion their future as well, to give them the same chance for a good life he wanted for his own son.

What motivated George brought to mind for me a letter I read last summer at Omagh when, together, we met with survivors of the bombing there. It was sent to our then-Ambassador to Ireland, Jean Kennedy Smith, who is also with us tonight, and thank you, Jean.

I want to read this to you so you will understand from a personal point of view why I'm giving this medal to George tonight and why

I want every person who is a part of this process to leave here tonight determined to get over this last hurdle and to remember that we do not have a day to waste. Easter is coming again. Good Friday is coming again.

We have to give an accounting of ourselves. So remember this: "Dear Ambassador, you may not know me. You may not even get this letter. But after yesterday's tragedy, I wanted to do something. I'm 29 years old, an Irishman to the very core of my being. But throughout my life, there has never been peace on this island. I never realized how precious peace could be until my wife gave birth to our daughter, Ashleen, 20 months ago. We don't want her to grow up in a society that is constantly waiting for the next atrocity, the next batch of young lives snuffed out by hatred and fear.

"Ashleen's name means 'vision' or 'dream,' and we have a dream of what Ireland might be like when she grows up. Ireland could be a place where dreams would come true, where people would achieve things never imagined before, where people would not be afraid of their neighbors. We know America has done much for Ireland and all we ask is that you keep trying. Please keep Ireland in mind because Ashleen and all Irish children need to be able to dream."

Well, my thanks go to the *Taoiseach*, to Prime Minister Blair, to Mo Mowlam, the leaders of the parties, our Government, but especially to my good friend George Mitchell, who never meant to sign on for quite the job he got but who did it as an act of love and devotion.

George, thank you for your service to our Nation. Thank you for your wisdom. Thank you for being so tenacious. Thank you for your friendship and for being a truly fine human being.

Major Everhart, read the citation.

[At this point, Maj. Carlton Everhart, USAF, Air Force Aide to the President, read the citation. The President then presented the medal, and George Mitchell made brief remarks.]

The President. Thank you, George, for your service and your remarks tonight.

You know, when you stay in this work as long as Senator Mitchell and I have, you're not often moved by what other people in

public life say. And even sometimes when you're moved, you doubt the ability of one person's words to move another. Tonight I think I can speak for all of us when I say we were genuinely moved by what George Mitchell said.

And I believe I can speak for all of us who are not parties and will have no direct say, that we hope and pray that they were moved and emboldened and redetermined by Senator Mitchell's words. I will say what I have said from the beginning: The United States will support all sides in Ireland that take honest steps for peace. And I hope and believe that the necessary steps can be taken before we pass another Good Friday.

Thank you very much.

Now, enough of this really too serious stuff. Now we're going to have St. Patrick's Day fun. Let me begin by thanking the performers who already have been entertaining you here and in the White House. Let me mention them all, and then I think we should give them a round of applause: the Irish Fire band and dancers from the O'Hare School of Irish Dance; the Culkin School of Traditional Irish Dance and The Next Generation Band; the harpists, Ellen James and Michael O'Hanlan; the Prince George's County Police Pipe Band; and the U.S. Marine Band Irish Ensemble. Thank you very much. Hillary and I appreciate it. [Applause]

There is another great performance ahead: Both Sides Now, music and spoken words celebrating the people of Northern Ireland. You will hear the great music from our friends Phil Coulter and James Galway, two of Ireland's and the world's great musicians. Last December they performed together in Oslo on a great day, the day John Hume and David Trimble received the Nobel Peace Prize.

They are joined by some familiar faces, Roma Downey and Aidan Quinn. We thank them for being here. And you will hear from the musicians of Different Drums of Ireland, whose sounds represent a melding of Ireland's traditions.

Finally, you will hear from a truly beautiful and remarkable young woman, Claire Gallagher. She lost her sight in the terrible bombing at Omagh, but she did not lose the vision

and strength of her spirit and soul. And her mission for peace is powerful and clear.

Claire came here tonight with her parents, her siblings, her teacher, and we are genuinely honored to have her. Hillary was so moved by her before in Northern Ireland, and I can't say enough about my respect for what she has done to carry on with what will still be a genuinely remarkable life.

I thank all of our performers in advance. And again, I say I hope the music and the spirit embodied by the Irish who are here will also help to give us the strength and resolve to fulfill the final promises of the Good Friday accord.

Thank you, and God bless you

NOTE: The President spoke at 8:45 p.m. in a pavilion on the South Grounds at the White House. In his remarks, he referred to Prime Minister Bertie Ahern of Ireland; Celia Larkin, who accompanied Prime Minister Ahern; First Minister David Trimble and Deputy First Minister Seamus Mallon of the Northern Ireland Assembly; Social Democratic and Labour Party leader John Hume; Sinn Fein leader Gerry Adams; Queen Elizabeth II, Prime Minister Tony Blair, and Secretary of State for Northern Ireland Marjorie Mowlam of the United Kingdom; "Star Wars" creator George Lucas; and actors Roma Downey and Aidan Quinn. The transcript made available by the Office of the Press Secretary also included the remarks of Mr. Mitchell.

United States-Africa Ministerial Joint Communique

March 18, 1999

From March 15–18, 1999 the United States hosted the first-ever meeting of African and American Ministers to enhance the U.S.-Africa partnership in order to foster greater economic development, trade, investment, political reform, and mutual economic growth in the 21st century. The President, eight members of the Cabinet, and four agency heads met for the first time with the African delegations. Eighty-three Ministers from forty-six sub-Saharan African nations, representatives from four North African nations, and the heads of eight African regional organizations participated in this historic and successful meeting. African Ministers also met with members of the U.S. Congress.

In an effort to consolidate and build upon the significant progress achieved in Africa in recent years, Ministers and senior U.S. officials discussed concrete ways to accelerate Africa's integration into the global economy. African Ministers expressed strong support for the immediate passage by Congress of the African Growth and Opportunity Act and for continued implementation of the President's Partnership for Economic Growth and Opportunity.

U.S. and African Ministers engaged in an active exchange on a broad range of economic, political, and social issues. They shared the view that high indebtedness constitutes a serious constraint to sustainable development in many African countries. In response to African requests for more effective debt relief, President Clinton proposed a six-point expanded debt relief program for highly indebted poor countries, which was warmly welcomed by the African ministers.

African and American officials discussed trade finance, market access, and access to private investment capital for ventures in Africa. Initiatives to enhance trade and investment links and economic policy dialogue were discussed as well as efforts to improve transportation and communications infrastructure and cooperation in agribusiness and energy. Ministers also reaffirmed the importance of addressing environmental issues. They noted that early ratification by the U.S. Senate of the UN Convention to Combat Desertification will help to mobilize community and international efforts to better manage land and water resources.

African Ministers and their U.S. counterparts exchanged ideas on how to enhance Africa's ability to compete in the global market through the development of its greatest resource—its people. Emphasizing the need for accelerating reform and continued development assistance as well as trade and investment, participants examined ways to bolster human capacity through investment in education, skills training, gender equity, micro-enterprises and health, particularly the prevention of HIV/AIDS. All agreed that these steps will accelerate the ability of Africa to sustain socio-economic development and reduce poverty. They also recognized the crucial role of regional cooperation in the overall